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THE STATE OF INTERNAL STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION
INSTITUTIONS IN BOTSWANA: A KNOWLEDGE SHARING PERSPECTIVE.

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Abstract

This study sought to discover the extent of internal stakeholder collaboration in private higher education (PHE) institutions in Botswana by determining the existence or absence of engagement of academic staff associations and Student Representative Councils (SRCs). The study adopted a multimethod research approach leading to methodological triangulation whereby quantitative and qualitative data were obtained through a questionnaire and face-to-face interviews respectively. The research participants comprised 132 members of academic staff from five PHE institutions covered in this study. The probabilistic sampling procedure was used to select respondents to the questionnaire, while purposeful sampling was used to select respondents to the in-depth interviews. The results of the study revealed the absence of effective stakeholder engagement in the selected PHE institutions as virtually all the institutions did not have academic staff associations, while SRCs were not afforded freedom of operation. In order to enhance KM practices in PHE institutions, it is recommended that the institutions adopt a systematic approach to collaboration with both internal and external stakeholders such as students, parents, government, staff associations, and industry.

Keywords: Knowledge, knowledge creation, knowledge sharing, communities of practice, collaboration, stakeholder engagement

Introduction

In the 21st century knowledge economy, organisational members are encouraged to work collectively in order to create and share knowledge. This can be done through the establishment of Communities of Practice (COPs) as tools for collaboration. According to Jang and Koi (2014) COPs are a knowledge creation grouping which obtains and distributes knowledge and work tactics needed by members of an organisation. Creation of COPs by academic staff members of Private Higher Education (PHE) institutions enables members to collectively participate in problem-solving activities thus increasing work efficiency leading to improvement of the work performance of the individuals and their organisations. This has a financial effect characterised by a reduction in terms of operational cost and time needed to

accomplish given tasks. Pattinson and Preece (2014) argue that collaboration in organisations through COPs, for example, leads to development of more effective business strategy and innovation, help in the establishment of new lines of business, help solve organisations' problems on the spot, transfer best practices from one member of the organisation to another, and helps to develop and transfer professional skills among employees of these organisations. This study therefore sought to determine the extent of internal stakeholder collaboration (or otherwise) in selected PHE institutions in Botswana especially considering that they were operating in a highly regulated environment which made effective knowledge exchange critical.

Literature Review

This section discusses the concepts of knowledge sharing and stakeholder

engagement, and their benefits to the organisation concerned.

Knowledge sharing

Diverse organisations including higher education institutions have adopted knowledge management over the past decade as society has identified effective knowledge management to be a crucial factor for success in every sector (Kim and Mauborgne, 2008). Due to environmental changes, higher education institutions now face ever growing faculty demands for sharing quality resources and expertise (Kim and Mauborgne, 2008). Knowledge sharing (formal or informal) means transfer, dissemination, and exchange of knowledge, experience, skills, and valuable information from one individual to other members within an organisation (Sajeva 2014).

Internal stakeholder engagement (Collaboration)

Collaboration is a working practice whereby individuals work together to a common purpose to achieve business benefit (Chen, 2012). Organisational leadership needs to establish a culture of collaboration in an organisation whereby people work in groups (communities of practice - CoPs) assisting each other in accomplishing their job tasks (Connell, Kriz, and Thorpe, 2014; Saenz and Perez-Bouvier, 2014). Jang and Koi (2014) believe that CoPs enable members to collectively participate in problem-solving, and share information, insights, and comments, thereby increasing work efficiency, and improving the work performance of the individuals and the organisation at large and these serve as a springboard for knowledge exchange (Saenz and Perez-Bouvier, 2014; Cai, 2012). Chen (2012) believes that collaboration brings individual members of an organisation obvious benefits that include acquiring more knowledge in an environment characterised by shortage, increased openness, and team spirit which are critical ingredients in knowledge exchange (Husted, Michailova, Minbaeva, and Pedersen, 2012) especially the complex, tacit knowledge which requires even more frequent interaction in order to develop a more effective

common understanding among employees (Schilling, 2011). This study sought to establish the existence or absence of collaboration (stakeholder engagement/involvement) in PHE institutions in Botswana through a questionnaire and in-depth interviews.

Methodology

The study used the both the quantitative and qualitative techniques to collect data. The questionnaire was the dominant data collection instrument, supported by in-depth face-to-face interviews. The questionnaire comprised both open ended questions (that allow respondents more freedom of expression) and closed ended questions (which are easy to complete, precode, interpret and analyse, and have a higher return rate). The research participants comprised 132 members of academic staff from five PHE institutions covered in this study. The subjects were considered on the grounds of time and financial constraints. All in all, 132 questionnaires were distributed of which 116 were returned ensuring an 87.9% response rate. The probabilistic sampling procedure, in which the sampling units were selected by chance and for which there was a known chance of each unit being selected, was used to select respondents to the questionnaire, while purposeful sampling (convenient sampling), where participants were chosen on the basis of knowledge of the research constructs, was used to select respondents to the in-depth interviews.

Results

The study sought to determine the extent to which PHE institutions involved important internal stakeholders in the running of their affairs so as to facilitate knowledge sharing in a context characterised by intense regulation. Respondents to the questionnaire confirmed that their organisations operated in an environment which was highly regulated (mean of 4.4)(see Table 1). This result was confirmed by virtually all the interviewees who indicated that their organisations operated in a highly regulated environment characterised by heavy policing by Botswana Qualifications Authority (BQA).

Table 1: Analysis of stakeholder involvement in KM activities of PHE institutions

Items	Std Dev	Mean
My organisation operates in an environment which is highly regulated by the BQA	1.17	4.40
In your organisation, to what extent is crucial information concentrated in the hands of a privileged few?	.80	4.07
To what extent are employees of your organisation involved in decision-making?	1.02	2.11
To what extent is there interaction between BQA and academic staff of your institution to exchange information?	.86	3.30
To what extent is your institution open to ideas coming from internal stakeholders (e.g staff members, students)?	.90	3.06
To what extent does the top management of your organisation publicly acknowledge the source of knowledge even if it is a junior employee?	.92	2.01
To what extent does your institution hold meetings with staff and students to ensure effective knowledge exchange?	1.14	2.04
To what extent is your institution's Student Representative Council (SRC) free to carry out its mandate without victimisation from top management?	1.02	2.03
In my organisation, staff members can freely form staff associations that operate freely without fear of victimisation	.94	1.52

Table 1 shows that respondents felt that employees of selected PHE institutions could not freely form staff associations without fear of victimisation (mean of 1.52), and also that Students Representative Councils (SRCs) were not free to carry out their mandate without undue influence from top management or threat of victimisation (2.03). This meant that respondents believed that both students and staff of selected PHE institutions were not free to form associations to promote their interests and share knowledge with the employers without being victimised. Table 1 also indicates that crucial information was concentrated in the hands of a privileged few (4.07) which implied that there was little movement and exchange of knowledge. There was little involvement of employees in decision-making (2.11) implying that whatever knowledge these employees possessed was not effectively exploited for the good of the organisations.

The above views were confirmed by qualitative data. The majority of the interviewees indicated that leadership of SRCs of most of the selected PHE institutions were imposed by top

leadership so that they towed the line and cited examples of student leaders who were expelled for expressing student grievances. Most interviewees also confirmed that no general staff meetings were held because top management did not want to bring all employees together lest they influenced each other based on common grievances. The respondents also cited examples of staff members who were expelled at one point or another for attempting to form, or after they had formed, staff associations.

Conclusion

The importance of this study in unraveling the extent of stakeholder collaboration as a critical KM practice has been confirmed by the research findings which ensured the achievement of the objectives of the study. The study revealed that collaboration, as a critical KM enabler that lead to effective KM initiatives, was missing in the operations of selected PHE institutions. There were no effective mechanisms for internal stakeholder involvement and/or engagement to ensure the smooth flow of information within the institutions to the stakeholders and back – or

even knowledge exchange with these important stakeholders such as students and staff. The study sought to determine the extent to which the institutions were open to ideas coming from internal stakeholders such students and staff.

The majority of the respondents to the questionnaires and face-to-face interviews revealed that there was limited interaction between selected PHE institutions and key stakeholders such as SRCs and staff associations to facilitate exchange of information and expectations. The respondents also believed that selected PHE institutions were open to ideas from internal stakeholders to a limited extent. Lack of effective interaction between top management and internal stakeholders, meaning lack of collaboration, in selected PHE institutions meant that these institutions were not benefiting from the concept of CoPs. This contrasts with the research of Jang and Koi (2014) who found that during the last ten years, successful Korean companies such as Samsung, Hyundai Motors, and others have established several dozen CoPs whereby members collectively participate in problem-solving, and share information, insights, and comments, thus increasing work efficiency, and improving the work performance of the individuals and the organisation as a whole. They add that improvement in work efficiency processes leads to a financial effect that is characterised by a reduction in both operational costs and the time required to complete tasks.

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